

**Tuition bill would fund in-state ed***Teri Finneman**The Forum - 02/11/2007*

A plan to retain young people in North Dakota by using tax dollars to send them to state colleges is new for the state, but it's been done elsewhere to mixed reviews.

The North Dakota bill – commonly called the North Dakota Promise – faces a major test this week when the full Senate votes on it.

And, while popular, Senate Bill 2347 has raised questions:

- Why require high school students take four years of science and math to qualify for funding?
- Why not a needs-based program instead of a merits-based program?

As many as 74 percent of North Dakota high school graduates attend North Dakota colleges, according to one study.

- Will the state retain these college graduates even if it invests in them?

Bill sponsor Sen. Tony Grindberg, R-Fargo, proposes using \$425 million in state funding to support the promise.

One thing is known: Legislators from both sides of the political aisle believe the bill's concept should continue to be studied.

The benefits and drawbacks of similar programs have been discovered elsewhere.

One of those programs is in Kalamazoo, Mich., the blueprint for North Dakota's plan.

Kalamazoo's plan

The Kalamazoo Promise has rejuvenated the once-faltering city of about 80,000 in less than two years, officials there say.

The program gives every Kalamazoo Public School graduate the chance to attend a Michigan public college with up to a 100 percent tuition scholarship.

The idea began with talks about how to increase the city's economic development, said Janice Brown, superintendent of Kalamazoo Public Schools.

The city's suburbs were draining its population and their budget was near bankruptcy, said area economic developer Ron Kitchens.

Many high school graduates in the district of more than 11,000 also weren't going to college, Brown said.

Of the 502 students who graduated from Kalamazoo Public Schools in 2006, 410 were eligible for the program. Of those, 318 are using the scholarships. The program is supported by private donors.

Since the Kalamazoo Promise began, home values are up 10 percent, \$10 million in new housing was built last year and 1,000 more students are in the school system. The promise has also been a good recruitment tool for businesses, Kitchens said.

The Kalamazoo Promise doesn't have a residency requirement for college graduates. To keep them, Kitchens said the community is building internship programs and working to let students know what jobs are available.

The big debate

The academic requirements in North Dakota's bill have raised some questions.

While Grindberg has praised Kalamazoo's effort, Kitchens criticized merit scholarship programs like Grindberg's, calling them "elitist."

Scholarship programs should be open to all students and shouldn't tell kids who don't have a 3.0 that they're not important, Kitchens said.

Grindberg points out the Kalamazoo Promise has a merit-based component by requiring the college students maintain a 2.0 GPA.

There's been "a fair amount of debate" over the North Dakota Promise's requirement that high school students take four years of science and math, said Grindberg, the executive director of the North Dakota State University Research and Technology Park.

But Senate Bill 2309, sponsored by Sen. Dave Nething, R-Jamestown, and approved by the full Senate, would make most of those science and math requirements mandatory.

That bill, if made into law as is, would change graduation requirements to include three years of math and science by 2012-13. By 2014-15, students would have to take four years of math and three years of science.

North Dakota Higher Education Chancellor Eddie Dunn said the science and math requirements will be positive for students. They will be "more appropriately prepared for the kind of technology-driven, knowledge-based economy they're going to find themselves in," he said.

Grindberg thinks the North Dakota Promise will be a great motivator for parents and students to set higher expectations.

Georgia HOPE

A Georgia study reported mixed results for pushing higher achievement in return for state aid. Started in 1993, Georgia's HOPE scholarship and grant program is one of the country's longest-running.

HOPE increased freshman enrollments, particularly among black students, according to a study by two economics professors at the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia in Athens.

More of the "best and the brightest" students were also retained, with college freshman SAT scores increasing by 60 points.

But the report also found HOPE decreased full-load enrollment and increased course withdrawals among freshmen between 1993 and 1997, the most recent data available.

Freshmen and sophomores took 1.2 fewer math and science core-curriculum credits because of the scholarship, with its requirement to maintain a B average.

Grindberg said he can't predict if North Dakota students would drop classes or take easier classes because of his plan. As the promise moves forward, the Legislature could modify it, he said.

Grindberg's bill is set up so students couldn't get college tuition assistance for more than four years even though most students today don't graduate for at least five. Students also have to attend full time, so dropping classes and adding years wouldn't be in a student's best interest, Grindberg said.

North Dakota State University student body president Dante Miller has said tuition help would give students more time to focus on academics instead of working one or more part-time jobs to pay for school.

Need vs. merit

Some critics of the North Dakota Promise say more should be done to help those not likely to attend college.

Merit scholarships are generally given to people who would have gone to college anyway, said David Mustard, an associate economics professor at the Terry College of Business in Georgia.

States need to decide if the small number of students the scholarship may influence is enough compensation for giving money to a broader group, Mustard said.

Grindberg says the goal of his program is to increase student achievement and strengthen the workforce.

The merit program worked in Georgia because the state didn't have a high college participation rate, said David Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in Boulder, Colo.

Grindberg understands the push for needs-based programs, but said the North Dakota Promise is open to those of any income level.

North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven's executive budget also recommends a \$2.5 million increase in student financial assistance grants, so needs-based help is already there, Grindberg said.

Worth the money?

Grindberg's plan involves using \$425 million in state funds to support the promise, with incremental allocations made between the 2007-09 and 2027-29 bienniums. The fund is expected to earn \$130 million during that time, creating a \$555 million fund.

Sen. Tim Mathern, D-Fargo, wondered how the state would benefit from its investment and how graduates would be kept in North Dakota.

The bill doesn't restrict someone from moving out of state. But, Grindberg says, it does provide an incentive for people who decide to move back with their children.

North Dakota should do "anything and everything" to retain its high school graduates, said higher ed chancellor Dunn.

North Dakota University System supporters have said 70 percent of North Dakota high school students who go to college in the state remain in the state after graduation.

Grindberg's bill reflects one of the oldest concerns for states – how to keep students at home, said Tom Mortenson, a higher education policy analyst in Oskaloosa, Iowa.

However, he said the concern should be what's in the better interest of the student.

"Any student that can, should go away – way away – to college. It is a part of growing up, of starting on one's own, of experiencing the larger and more diverse world that exists beyond one's neighborhood," Mortenson said.

State efforts would be better focused on building an economy that produces attractive job opportunities, he said.

Dunn doesn't think talks need to get down "to that kind of an 'either/or' discussion."

As the bill makes its way through the system, Dunn said the North Dakota Promise has created necessary discussion.

"We clearly know what we need to do in order to be competitive as a state," he said.

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